CHARLES EVANS

Darjeeling and Beyond

On leave from the Forgotten Army

When Charles Evans died in 1995, he left a manuscript of his experiences as a 'Doctor in the XIVth Army – Burma 1944 -1945', the so called Forgotten Army. In 1998 his wife Denise secured a publisher – Leo Cooper of Pen and Sword Books – who wanted it shorter so some sections were cut, including this delightful account of two weeks 'leave' over New Year 1945, to Darjeeling and beyond in the shadow of Kangchenjunga. It is now published for the first time as a special tribute to Charles Evans to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the first ascent of that majestic mountain on 25 May 1955 by the British team led by Charles himself. In his own prophetic words at the age of 26, 'I was at the edge of what I wanted to do and yet it seemed utterly unattainable.'

There was a wide choice of places to go on leave. Some liked the bright lights of the clubs and hotels of Calcutta; others chose to spend their leave at one of several hill stations where the climate was good and limited social amenities could be found. My idea was to go to a hill station and see how close I could get to the big mountains. I chose Darjeeling partly because it was nearest to Calcutta and partly because the name had magic associations; it had been the starting point of the early expeditions to Everest and Kangchenjunga and as far as I knew it was the only place outside Nepal where the Sherpa people, of whom I had read a good deal, were to be found.

Siliguri, where the mountains began, was the end of the main line and the Darjeeling Mail from Calcutta went no farther. I crossed the station platform to what at first looked like a toy train – the mountain railway to Darjeeling. The squat little steam engines were driven by hillmen with pillbox caps and Gurkha faces; they had two helpers, cheerful-looking urchins who sat over the front wheels of the engine, one each side; their job was to throw handfuls of sand on the line whenever the rails were slippery on the climb of nearly 8,000 feet to Darjeeling.

Darjeeling was on the crest and western slope of a narrow ridge; only the small bazaar some way below the ridge was on flat ground. At the station a pale girl with slanting brown eyes and pleasant features lifted my heavy kitbag on her back with an easy movement, at the same time arranging a carrying strap across her forehead. I hesitated to let her add my rucksack to her load but she made nothing of it and we set off to walk up The Mall,

the main street, to the Windamere Hotel. Before long I was breathing heavily and turned to see if she was falling back: not a bit of it. She was at my heels and showed no signs of breathing, heavily or otherwise. Clearly I had misjudged the situation. She was the first Sherpa, or rather Sherpani, that I had met. We passed a café in a square called the Chowrasta and I heard the voices of soldiers on leave. 'Ham an' eggs an' chips twice, please Miss.' And 'What's at the flicks tonight?'

The Windamere was high on a sharp ridge, and more like a boarding house than a hotel. The guests seemed much the same in Darjeeling as they would have been in a wartime English country hotel – Wantage, say, or Woodstock, or for all I knew even Windermere itself. There were old ladies, hook nosed and grey haired, some plump, some thin, dressed in lace and black fur; there were a few middle-aged and young women, rather flabby, busy feeders; and there was a sprinkling of hearty young soldiers on leave from the 5th Indian Division.

Next day I artlessly set about arranging my 10 or 12 days' trek. I went first to the Deputy Commissioner's office and tackled the Indian clerk at the reception desk. He was from Bihar and his name was Gopal Prusung.

'Have you any maps of the area?' I asked. He gave a sideways twitch of the head.

'O yes Sir, we have 500 maps.'

'All right. I should like to have a look and buy one or two.'

'Sir, they are not for sale.'

He told me there was no place where you could buy maps and when I explained that I was intending to go for a trek, and would be camping where I felt inclined he added that there was no place where you were allowed to camp. 'There are many wild animals about, Sir. They will eat you up.'

He went on to say that the rules were that any trek must be officially approved and places booked at dak bungalows. In the end I persuaded Gopal Prusung to book me in for a night at a bungalow near Tiger Hill above Ghum and also at a number of bungalows along the Singalila ridge to Phalut, a well-known viewpoint at about 12,000 feet.

I spent the next two days by myself, walking down the 3,000 feet to Batamtam one day and coming back the next. Batamtam had about it a deep calm; I had a bungalow to myself where a friendly old *chowkidar* anticipated my efforts to light a fire by doing it for me. The small garden was lent a dash of colour by the bright red leaves of poinsettia, a magnolia was just coming into flower and there were sweet-smelling roses, red and white, and ferns and many small flowers whose names I did not know. The Rungneet, a tributary of the Teesta, roared in the glen below, and all about the bungalow I could hear the subdued voices of children. I cooked a simple meal and looked at *Blackwood's Magazine*, of which there were old copies in the bungalow; after dark I went outside to enjoy the moonlight and listen to the chirping of crickets. The night was warm down there and I was tired,

and content to be alone. As I climbed back to Darjeeling next day I was overtaken by a spindly-legged figure dressed in white; he held an umbrella as, I was sure, a badge of status. I was breathless and his insistence on entering into a long and one-sided conversation in English was irritating. 'Where are you going? What is your business? Why are you carrying your luggage?' My answer to the last question, 'Because I enjoy it' must have sounded hollow when anyone could see that I was not enjoying it at all, and his next question had about it a remorseless logic, 'In that case, why are you going so slowly?'

I decided that night to swallow my pride and find a porter for my next excursion. I went to see a Captain Kydd who could, I was told, engage porters for me. He was a plump man, a civilian, and wanted I think to be helpful. We fell out as soon as he exclaimed that I should on no account have been given dak bungalow passes without evidence that I had first booked Sherpa porters and a cook – 'and,' I retorted crossly, 'I suppose a sweeper and water carrier as well!' He countered by informing me that the local Area Commander, a General, had issued orders about not lowering British prestige by having too few servants. To my irritation he addressed me all the time as 'Sahib'.

Next morning I rang the Station Staff Officer and had no difficulty in obtaining authorisation for the trek to Phalut. I then borrowed a map of Darjeeling from another officer in the hotel and made a copy of it. He had bought it without trouble in Calcutta from the Survey of India, as I should have done if I had known better.

In the Darjeeling bazaar I encountered groups of Tibetans; their long hair was in pigtails and they wore earrings, embroidered hats with fur-trimmed flaps, and long cloth boots bound below the knee with colourful woven garters; they were wild and dirty-looking men who had come over the passes from Tibet for trade. As I walked up from the bazaar to the hotel the dank grey cloud which had covered Darjeeling since I got there parted; I turned to look north and saw Kangchenjunga before me, its whiteness against a pale blue sky making the white of the clouds below appear a dirty grey. My feelings were deeper than I could have imagined.

I put my hands on an iron railing and looked down at the brightly coloured bazaar below but my eyes went back again and again to the gigantic mountain vision. From the edge of the hill by the Windamere Hotel I sat down to gaze once more; after about 10 minutes the clouds closed the gap before me and that day I did not again see the vision. I had a feeling that I remembered from a first visit to the Alps, of being on the edge of going into new mountains: I was at the edge of what I wanted to do and yet it seemed utterly unattainable because of my lack of familiarity with local conditions and my dislike of some of the accepted ways of doing things there. All right, I thought, I will behave like a Sahib until I have found out all I need to know. I went back to Kydd and engaged a sturdy, smiling young Sherpa called Lobsang.

The Singalila Ridge, high and winding, ran west from Ghum, then north-west and finally north, over the high points of Tanglu (10,000ft) and Sandakphu (12,000ft) to Phalut, only slightly lower. North and east of the ridge was Sikkim, accessible to foreigners only by permission of the Government of India. To the west lay the closed and secret kingdom of Nepal, home of the Gurkhas, a land of great mountains in which lay the whole of the west side of Kangchenjunga and the south side of the main Himalayan range, which included Makalu, Everest, Lhotse and many other peaks. At that time Nepal was almost totally closed to foreign travellers whose eyes, from the Singalila ridge, could only gaze across the tangle of hills with yearning.

Lobsang bought rice at Sukhiapokhri bazaar and we carried on to Jorepokhri bungalow at 7,500 feet. Lobsang was a cheerful and colourful figure; he wore a grey Balaclava helmet with the peak pointing any old way; three shirts, a blue, a light red and a grey; a light grey jacket; bright blue pants; two pairs of stockings and large black boots. The boots were so big that he soon began to suffer from blisters which turned into ulcers; from that moment he carried the boots slung round his neck and walked barefoot whether there was snow on the ground or not. He walked at a steady three miles an hour with a rapid step, whistling as he went; sometimes he imitated bird calls and whenever he reached the crest of a rise he whistled shrilly through his teeth like a marmot. Jorepokhri bungalow was on a hillock covered with mossy lawns. There was a small lake and the plot was surrounded by fir trees. Lobsang lit a fire and we drank tea. I went outside and as I walked quietly by the lake I came on a deer; it stood about four feet high at the shoulder and showed its white tail as it bounded away through the trees.

Ten years later there was a jeepable military road to Sandakphu, but in 1945 and even in 1952, when I again walked that way, there was no more than a bridle path. As we climbed the 3,500 feet from Mani Banjyiang to our next night's stop at Tanglu, Lobsang began occasionally to converse, going uphill with only slightly slackened speed, and maintaining his quick step. He always had enough breath to talk and presently pointed out a tumbledown ruin of a bungalow, remarking with a grin, '*Achcha wala bangala, Sahib*' – 'Fine bungalow, Sir', betraying a sense of irony that quickly became the basis of our relationship. Five hundred feet short of Tanglu, when I was longing to sit down, he stopped and produced a bottle of the local beer, '*chang*', which we shared. It was a clear yellowish liquid tasting vaguely of wine, rather sour and yeasty. He made certain that I had more than half the bottle and either the last 500 feet were very steep or else the *chang* was hard on the wind, for long before we reached Tanglu I was going very slowly and feeling muzzy about the head. Our path was along a bare grassy ridge; the grass was short and yellow and below us on either side were rocky outcrops and stunted, moss-covered trees – dwarf oak, and holly. Farther down were jungle and the depths of a great valley. In one place we passed

huts where there were dirty, ragged children and many chickens. The path was either stony or muddy and Lobsang stoutly ploughed his way up in bare feet through mud or snow. I liked his straightforwardness:

'How old are you, Lobsang?'

'Me?'

'Yes'

'20 years,' pause, 'What about you?'

'26'

After a rest I went to the top of a rise 200 feet above the post at Tanglu. There was a dusting of snow everywhere. The west side of the sharp peak fell quickly to dense jungle and I heard the murmur of a distant river; beyond a succession of sunlit valleys I could see terraces and clusters of houses.

I sat sheltering from the wind behind a small stone tower on which white flags fluttered from bamboos: Lobsang called it a *daza*. Here at over 10,000 feet were only barren stones, moss and stunted vegetation. On the hills to the north was a patchy covering of snow, streaks of cloud lay in the valleys and parts of the steep hillsides far below were terraced. They recalled the Chin hills except that those were rarely high enough to lose the jungle altogether. Three thousand feet below and only 10 miles away in a direct line the windows of Darjeeling reflected the setting sun and later, after dark, I could see the lights of street lamps. After I had cooked some of what Captain Kydd ('for prestige, you understand') had called 'the Doctor Sahib's special experimental food' – and what was it but wheat flour, curry, rice and dal? – the local police visited me.

'Where have you come from, Sahib? Where are you going? What is purpose of journey?' He was a nice sergeant, but what a fuss!

'You will not be entering Nepal, Sahib?'

'I would not dream of it.'

The rice, bought at Sukhiapokhri and carried wrapped in an old handkerchief, was the best I had ever eaten, and so was the rest of the meal. Lobsang carried a large *kukri* in his belt and used it indifferently to spread butter, to chop firewood and to pare his toenails. The ordinary *kukri* has as one of its attachments a small blunt blade about whose use I was curious – it was shaped like the main blade – he explained that it was for striking a light.

Alone by the fire I fell to wondering what I wanted in life. I admired the strong and gentle, those who were masters of themselves; I wanted to be like that. I wanted to know more of mankind, how he lives, how he thinks; I wanted experience of the mountains and the sea, of my own power, and of life in different places, city and wilderness. As to work, I did not know.

On 5 January 1945 sunrise came very rapidly and lit everything in the west with a bright clear light which made rocks and trees and grassy hillocks stand out with startling clarity against a grey-blue background. My feet had grown cold in the night and as we left Tanglu a little snow was falling, greeted by Lobsang with cries of affected dismay belied by a cheerful grin.

We walked over open scrubland patchily covered with snow through

which showed clumps of red moss. Soon we lost the way, went too far down on the Nepal side, and had to climb strenuously back to regain the ridge. Snow began to fall more thickly and a chill wind sprang up which lasted for the rest of the day. On the ridge were lengths of wall, the stones carved with figures of Buddha and writing in Tibetan script – *Om mani padme hum*. We passed to the left and I asked Lobsang his religion.

'Lama,' he said, which I took to mean Buddhist.

We now lost height and went down and down to a narrow saddle where there were huts. Lobsang found more *chang* and stood me a drink; profiting by experience I drank only half a mugful – we still had a long way to go. The cold was bitter. We climbed steeply and steadily for four miles to Kalipokhri at 10,000 feet. Kalipokhri means 'black lake' and near some wattle huts I could see a dark stagnant pond. The climb of 2,000 feet in four more miles to Sandakphu was simple misery in wind and blizzard. I was carrying only some 20 lbs and Lobsang had three times as much. I arrived about 15 minutes behind him, icy cold, sheeted with snow and trembling all over.

At Sandakphu there were several buildings. Lobsang and I entered the first, a tin-roofed shack with two rooms; in the blizzard conditions we had failed to see either the main bungalow or a building occupied by the caretaker or *chowkidar*. Lobsang soon had a roaring blaze going and over tea and chapattis and a small bottle of *chang* we settled down to a pleasant late afternoon. Outside the hut the blizzard continued to blow and when Lobsang brought in a pail of water there was ice on it.

I liked his rough humour. When he slipped on the snow he cried out 'Very good snow', and if I then said 'Well done', he roared with laughter. He told me that his home was in Nepal and that he meant to go back there the next year after earning more money.

I do not think I ever spent a more wretched night or longed so heartily for the dawn. First we got in two mattresses from the bedroom and put them down before the fire. I gave Lobsang a spare sweater and my groundsheet to add to his one blanket but even so he must have been terribly cold. I had two blankets and spent my time trying to ease aching limbs and at the same time lose as little heat as possible. About four in the morning Lobsang blew up the fire and we sat round it for half an hour while I made tea, then we tried again to sleep; this time I put my feet in my rucksack and was warmer. I found too that the mere act of turning over, and the puffing and blowing that followed, warmed me up enough to make me comfortable for a quarter of an hour. All night I had a sore nose, the prelude to a bad cold. In the morning I looked at the mess: dirty dishes, frozen water, snow on the table and over some of the chairs, snow piled 18 inches high inside the door, a gusty gale outside rattling the shutters and piling up more snow. I shaved painfully. I was extremely breathless.

After a look outside and a talk with Lobsang I went to see who was in the main bungalow. I found three army officers and half a dozen Sherpas.

10. Charles Evans thanking hospitable villagers at the first hamlet on return from the first ascent of Kangchenjunga, June 1955. (*George Band collection*)

They were going no farther and were about to start back to Tanglu. Lobsang and I decided to follow their tracks and 400 feet down overtook them. They were ploughing slowly through two feet of new snow in the blizzard. The going was very heavy for the leader and the four of us who had no loads took it in turn to break a trail.

To reach Kalipokhri took four hours. We entered one of the huts and shared out some food before going on. My contribution of cold chapattis seemed as welcome to my new friends as their tinned butter and jam were to me. We struggled on down to the saddle where Lobsang and I had had *chang* the day before. We entered one of the huts there too and the Sherpas made tea for everyone. Since leaving Sandakphu we had been on the go for six hours.

Before going on, the Sherpas tore from the roof of the hut some long bamboo poles with which to test the depth of the snow on the track: the occupants were quite indifferent to this pilfering. All day I had had an unpleasant cold but I now began to feel better. The surface of the snow was sometimes firmer than it had been and I thought that I was beginning to recover. All the same, to plough ahead, spurred by conscience to take a turn at making the track for a 50-yard stretch, was heart-bursting. At 5.50pm the blizzard was blowing as hard as ever; we were in deep soft snow on the crest of the ridge and the light was beginning to fail. Everywhere was silence except for our grunts and groans and the noise of the wind. We had a short rest and then tried again but after 100 yards we all came to a stop and held a consultation. We turned back to a cluster of wattle huts that we had just passed and stumbled into the first one we reached; inside, except for a faint light from the glowing embers of a smoky fire, all was dark; the roof dripped melting snow and round the fire a family squatted, huddled together, looking up at us. We stood, breathing fiercely as cold and tired people do, stamping the snow from our boots and brushing it off our clothing.

Many years later I became used to the way in which Sherpas will enter the house of a stranger and take it over. They did so now. They carried embers from the fire to another part of the floor, breathed on them with those bellows Sherpas have for lungs, and soon we were sitting on low circular cane stools holding out our hands to a blaze and trying not to put our feet in the puddles on the floor. Slowly we undressed, drank tea out of china and copper bowls and warmed up; it was a strange scene – dim, blanketed figures, much coughing and spluttering, drips from the roof.

Lobsang merged in with the other Sherpas whose *sirdar* Ang Purba later fed us on army meat and vegetable stew followed by coffee. We ate in semi-darkness and retired into a wet corner of the room. The Sherpas carried on with their chatter (they will talk all night) and devoured huge bowls of rice while we looked on. Warm and fed, we were comfortable in spite of the stinging smoke and drips of water.

I slept on and off until a cock in the shack began to crow and I could dimly see the fowls, dogs, cats and children that shared our lodging. Gradually we came to and found on going outside a glorious sunny dawn which I hardly appreciated as my cold was worse again and affected my chest. There was not a cloud in the sky and Kangchenjunga was clear before us; we tried in vain to accustom our eyes to the glare of the bright sun on

new snow. After a large breakfast we assembled outside the hut and were required to take photographs of everyone who had been there, especially of one I took to be the lady of the house and who now appeared for the first time and politely proposed some recognition of her hospitality. She wore Sherpa style clothes, a dark blouse and a heavy striped woollen apron held in place by a pink cloth about the waist; she had knee-length woollen boots with leather soles and a long, thick, heavy necklace of alternating coral and a variegated stone that the Sherpas call *Zi*. She had two long pigtails and her earrings were gold-coloured metal discs four or five inches in diameter. Over everything she wore a purplish woollen coat or cloak which reached from the top of her head to her ankles. Like many Sherpa ladies she had the look of a woman on no account to be trifled with.

For four hours we plodded wearily in hot sunshine through deep soft snow and reached Tanglu exhausted. The sun on the new snow had been hot on our faces all the way, burning the eyeballs in spite of our efforts to shield them with pieces of cloth.

On the way from Sandakphu we had simply taken each other as comrades, sharing discomforts, food, drink, trail-breaking and the making of decisions; during the afternoon at Tanglu, as we rested, ate, and dried our sodden clothing we found out about each other, and I discovered that my three chance companions were as friendly, interesting and good-natured as I could have wished. They were a captain, a lieutenant and a corporal, gunners from 5th Indian Division.

Outside the bungalow the light was brilliant, the snow at our level was a smooth, fresh white and Kangchenjunga in this light looked whiter than ever. When I looked at it, pencil in hand to make a sketch, it was so bright that when I looked back to the paper I could for about 15 seconds see nothing of the sketch I was trying to draw.

In the valley was dense white cloud; Darjeeling in the distance was covered with snow. The arc of the northern horizon was a jagged line of rock, snow and ice. The sky beyond was a clear pale blue; far in north Sikkim the heads of one or two solitary peaks showed above the rest. Each peak alone would have been striking were it not that Kangchenjunga, knocking one off balance by its height, mass and nearness, made others look by comparison insignificant.

There was no wind and the sun was warm. Close at hand I heard the tinkle of a pony's bell, the drip of melting snow and the sound of icicles falling from the eaves. Lobsang pottered about all day barefoot in the snow, sometimes sitting beside me on the warm doorstep, watching me write and wondering, I supposed, what it was all about. We shared out the rice that was left and he began to cook his half while tuning and playing a four stringed instrument like a primitive guitar. I handed him my binoculars and he at once turned them to look from the big end to the small, clicking his tongue against his teeth, 'tck, 'tck with pleasure and repeating

'How small! How small!' Sherpas have distant vision which is so good as to be past belief and back to front was the only way I ever saw them use binoculars – a favourite pastime was to look at one's feet through the wrong end and try to walk like that over rough ground.

In the evening I sat on one side of the wood fire, Lobsang squatting on the other – clean, attractive little beggar. I gave him a dish of stewed prunes and afterwards he carefully pushed the stones through a hole between the floorboards and then neatly put a matchstick across the hole as though to complete the act; he would hold up a light for me to read, tend the fire or look quietly at a map of India. I had grown fond of him.

Two days' leisurely walking brought us back to Darjeeling. When we came to an awkward frozen bit of path he exclaimed 'Oho, ho, ho' and when I slipped and went to the bottom on my behind, burst into outright laughter. At Jorepokhri the lawns and trees were covered in new snow and the lake was hard frozen. We had bought rice on the way and I wondered how on earth Lobsang could eat so much: he told me that a pound of uncooked rice and two pounds of wheat flour were a proper day's ration; I could eat no more for a meal than the equivalent of a handful of uncooked rice.

He described how *kukris* were fashioned in the furnace and on the anvil in the villages. He claimed that in Nepal there were no '*chiddar*', the wattle huts in which we spent a night, and if by 'Nepal' he meant, as was customary with Nepalese, the capital Kathmandu, then he was right, but I came to know later that there were plenty of such huts up and down the country. Nothing had prepared me for the sort of life I saw led by the family in that hut: we could not make out where they slept nor how in spite of the drips and mud and smoke and damp they turned out for their photographs in the morning – apparently dry and fairly clean.

Back at the Windamere, I thought about my leave; measured in one way I had achieved nothing, but I had seen mountains of a size and splendour that no amount of reading, no photographs could have made real to me. I had found a closeness that makes relationships with Sherpas easy; I had found that I could live in this country on what I could find in villages by the way; and I had learnt something that I could not describe but which I knew would make future expeditions easier.

Lobsang came to see me off and brought his young wife; she was a pretty girl; she had a wide brilliant smile, her cheeks were like red apples and were framed by a fur-trimmed hat. She held a small brown puppy in the crook of her arm. Lobsang went with a party to the Zemu glacier within 12 months and all were lost in a heavy snowstorm.

When I left Darjeeling the mist was thick. Snow lay on the ground and small boys ran alongside the train offering Nepalese coins for sale and throwing in snowballs at anyone silly enough to open a window.